

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C1BALTIMORE SUN
7 January 1986

TELEVISION: THE WINTER MEETINGS TERRORISM IN THE U.S. NBC'S GOT THIS MOVIE . . .

By Bill Carter
Sun TV Critic

NBC's timing has improved with its ratings. One of the network's hot movie ideas for the year was a projected drama about a series of terrorist attacks on the United States.

NBC scheduled the film, "Under Siege," for early next month (February 9). The key terrorist in the film is called Abu Nidal. The name happens to have been derived from a slightly adjusted backward spelling of a real terrorist the film's authors discovered, through their research, was a major player in the underground world of international terrorism. His name is Abu Nidal.

That Nidal's name has been prominent in headlines during the past two weeks is only one reason why "Under Siege" is going to attract far more attention than the average TV movie. There are also the recent comments of Libyan leader Muammar el Kadhafi, and his threats to take acts of terrorism right into the streets of the United States. That happens to be precisely the plotline of "Under Siege," though Kadhafi is not directly tied to the terrorism in the film.

The film also won't be hurt in the least by the prospect of being among the most controversial TV projects of recent years for presenting, as it does, a portrait of the nation victimized by the most shocking sort of terrorist raids (including a missile attack on the Capitol in Washington) and an official government response to those raids that ranges from irresponsible to blatantly immoral.

The men responsible for making the film, producer Don Ohlmeyer, and writers Bob Woodward and Christian Williams, appeared here to talk about "Under Siege" and launch what probably will be a month-long public discussion (and promotion) of the issues and questions raised by the movie.

Ohlmeyer, the one-time executive producer of NBC Sports, but also the man who made the strikingly original (and controversial) TV movie "Special Bulletin" three years ago, said he initially got the idea for this project in the late 1970s while he was in Moscow preparing for NBC's aborted coverage of the 1980 Olympics.

"I was struck by what the Russians were able to do. Starting a year before the games every dissident was moved out of town. Two weeks before the games every kid under the age of 16 was

taken out of town. It made me realize that because of our freedom we are especially vulnerable to terrorism."

Ohlmeyer sat on the idea until 1984, when he read a series of articles in the *Washington Post* about the background of the Middle East brand of terrorism. Two of the authors of those articles were Woodward and Williams. Ohlmeyer invited the *Post* team to write a screenplay about terrorism brought to the United States. (That the title "Under Siege" has the initials U.S. hardly seems an accident.)

Woodward and Williams said the film is a result of their extensive research into terrorism as well as what the American government does and has done and might do in response to this sort of assault. They argued that the film is both a "cautionary tale" about what might happen in the event of terrorist strikes here, and also an accurate depiction of the sort of process and debate that has already taken place among government officials on the subject of terrorism.

Woodward said the film shows "how the coming of terrorism to the U.S. presents immense political problems for the president and police agencies. It also shows how debate is conducted."

Williams said, "We talked to a lot of intelligence people. The people who know are scared. . . . 'Rambo' is bull—. We got a problem here."

Ohlmeyer specifically cited the recent threats by Kadhafi as evidence of the film's credibility, and Woodward confirmed that Abu Nidal was the model for the lead terrorist in "Under Siege."

Williams described Nidal as a man who strikes fear in people virtually all over the world. "This one guy, with maybe 500 followers, can do things nobody else can do. He has the same sphere of influence as Alexander the Great, from London to Far Persia."

Woodward said that because "the whole mindset of Abu Nidal is different" in that he has no real demands, he poses "an unsolvable dilemma for the Reagan administration."

In the film the lead terrorist has no demand, no discernible ideology and commands suicide missions meant to "punish" the United States.

One thing the writers and Ohlmeyer argued the film does not do is present a blueprint on how to conduct a terrorist campaign in the United States. Ohlmeyer said, "There is not a single act in the picture that has not been perpetrated by a terrorist already," while Woodward and Williams called the acts of violence shown "primitive" next to more sophisticated terrorist strikes that could be made against U.S. targets such as the financial community or sources of water supply.

The more likely area of controversy will be how the film handles the actions of the fictional presidential administration headed by Hal Holbrook. Ohlmeyer said Holbrook was chosen deliberately because he is so "respected and loved" an actor. (He is not a model of Ronald Reagan, the authors contended, although Woodward did say that the main character, the FBI director played by Peter Strauss, does owe a lot to the real FBI chief William Webster.)

But in the film the president and several of his advisers are portrayed as trigger-happy to the point of irresponsibility. The ending will raise particular objections since it shows the president at least agreeing to — if not quite ordering — action that is overtly against the law.

Woodward said, "There has been specific debate within the administration about Libya and Abu Nidal. The debate that goes on takes the form of, 'We have to send a message; we need a demonstrable action.'"

Woodward admitted that the ending "does have a kind of Watergate flavor to it," a flavor he, of course, is quite familiar with personally. But he argued that "this is the kind of way many decisions are made in the White House."

Mainly Woodward and Williams argued that everything that happens in "Under Siege" could happen in reality. "This is a story about a terrible mistake," Williams said. "Something goes wrong." He added that he personally doesn't believe it would happen this way, but felt it was still a fair way to present a chain of events.

Of course it is also a way that will lend itself to more discussion, debate, controversy, and most probable of all, ratings.